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Passport Pressure

Sometimes the American preoccupation with privacy takes some quirky turns.

That could be said now of the flurry over the fact that the Passport Office "flags" names furnished by the courts, the FBI, the CIA and the Secret Service. The purpose is that when one of the named individuals applied for a passport, the Passport Office notified the agency concerned.

The practice makes sense.

If it serves the cause of law enforcement officials to know when a certain individual wants to travel, the Passport Office certainly is the logical place to find out. All other arrangements easily could be kept secret—airplane or ship tickets, accommodations or reservations of any sort certainly would not be volunteered by the travel carriers or lodging places.

Passport Director Frances Knight reports that her office maintains no dossiers and does not undertake surveillance of any sort which could be considered to constitute any invasion of privacy or spying.

Summary: Critics of the "flagging" practice are stirring a tempest in a filing cabinet.